

# Verbum Incarnatum: An Academic Journal of Social Justice

---

Volume 4 *Race, Religion, & Social Justice*

Article 8

---

1-1-2010

## Naming the Terrorist in Our Midst: Park51 and the Politics of Injustice

Nancy E. Nienhuis Th.D.

Andover Newton Seminary, [nienhuis@yale.edu](mailto:nienhuis@yale.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://athenaeum.uiw.edu/verbumincarnatum>

---

### Recommended Citation

Nienhuis, Nancy E. Th.D. (2010) "Naming the Terrorist in Our Midst: Park51 and the Politics of Injustice," *Verbum Incarnatum: An Academic Journal of Social Justice*: Vol. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://athenaeum.uiw.edu/verbumincarnatum/vol4/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Athenaeum. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Verbum Incarnatum: An Academic Journal of Social Justice* by an authorized editor of The Athenaeum. For more information, please contact [athenaeum@uiwtx.edu](mailto:athenaeum@uiwtx.edu).

## ***Naming the Terrorist in Our Midst: Park51 and the Politics of Injustice***

Nancy E. Nienhuis, Th.D.  
Andover Newton Theological School

### **Abstract**

*Given the role that “far-right Christianity” plays in fomenting suspicion and prejudice against non-Christians, this article argues that feminist and liberation theologies are critical for effective theory. Theoretical analysis is more robust when combined with critical feminist and liberation theological analyses for three reasons. First, religion is often appealed to as the moral underpinning of many positions in public debates when in fact it is being used to reinforce dominant systems of power. Second, without critical feminist and liberation theologians and ethicists taking a part in public debates, often the loudest or only religious voice heard in public debates has been that of a few conservative Christian groups with enormous power to define what counts as “Christian” for everyone else. Finally, perhaps the most critical potential contribution of critical feminist and liberation theologies and ethics is in the motivation they bring as many freedom struggles have been inspired by religious faith. This article utilizes these theories to critique the ad called “Kill the Ground Zero Mosque” developed by the National Republican Trust PAC and to expose its xenophobic and racist message.*

On July 12, 2010, Scott Wheeler, executive director of the National Republican Trust PAC, was featured on the Kilmeade and Friends show on Fox News Radio. He was promoting a new television advertisement against the proposed Park51 Community Center in New York City which the NRT PAC hoped to air on stations across the country. The ad is called “Kill the Ground Zero Mosque.” “We’re not saying all Muslims are terrorists at all,” Wheeler said, “but if it were someone within any other culture they would be very delicate about the sensitivities of the people who had been offended or damaged or murdered.”<sup>1</sup> Wheeler went on to explain that those in favor of the mosque were “pretending to

<sup>1</sup> The full interview with Brian Kilmeade is at <http://nationalrepublicantrust.com/> as is the “Kill the Ground Zero Mosque” advertisement. (2010, January 28) National television networks refused to air the spot.

be doing something good for the community” but implied that they were receiving funding from nefarious groups around the world. Radio host Brian Kilmeade then played the advertisement.<sup>2</sup>

The ad opens with an Islamic call to prayer in the background while the words “The audacity of Jihad” appear on a black screen. After 3 seconds the screen opens with film of Arab-dressed men in the desert with a variety of weapons, shooting and running around. In seconds 10-17, the film shows the planes hitting the twin towers in NYC, as well as footage of people jumping out of the towers while the narrator says, *On September 11 they declared war against us*. In seconds 18-21, groups of Arabs dancing, shouting and smiling appear. Narrator: *And to celebrate that murder of three thousand Americans*. In seconds 22-25, a beautiful mosque appears on the screen. Narrator: *They want to build a monstrous 13 story mosque at ground zero*. In seconds 26-30, the scene then changes to the ground zero rubble that remained after the towers fell. Narrator: *This ground is sacred*. White firefighters are seen in the rubble. Then in seconds 31-2, we hear bagpipes in the background playing “Amazing Grace” and see a man draped in the American flag. Narrator: *Where we weep...* At seconds 32-33, half the screen fades into more photos of Arab-dressed and Middle Eastern-looking men, some with weapons, dancing and jumping up and down. Narrator: *...they rejoice...* Then the man in the flag fades out and the full screen shows Arab military marching with weapons (seconds 34-36). Narrator: *That mosque is a monument to their victory and an invitation for more*. In seconds 37-42, the screen returns to white, male fire fighters standing before the smoking rubble. Narrator: *A mosque at ground zero must not stand. The political class says nothing*. Seconds 43-45 show a split screen with the White House in one half and President Obama in the other. Narrator: *The politicians are doing nothing to stop it*. In second 46 the words “Americans will be heard” appear on the screen, while an American fills half the screen. Narrator: *But we Americans will be heard*. Then “Join the Fight” appears on the screen (seconds 49-50) and the narrator says,

“On September 11  
they declared war  
against us.”

<sup>2</sup> For the full ad go to: <http://nationalrepublicantrust.com/>

*Join the fight to kill the ground zero mosque.* As the latter statement is made, “Kill the Ground Zero Mosque” appears on the screen, in seconds 51-53, superimposed over a mosque dome. The ad finishes with the web site [www.GOPTRUST.Com](http://www.GOPTRUST.Com) on the screen and the narrator saying, *Go to GOP Trust.com*. The final seconds show the ad was paid for by the NRT PAC, and the narrator finishes with *Paid for by National Republican Trust PAC, which is responsible for the content of this message*. The entire ad is 1:01 long. The narrator has a deep, male, unaccented, white-sounding, booming voice.

The NRT PAC was founded in 2008 and describes itself as "an independent organization to help promote American values and support federal candidates for Congress, Senate and the Presidency who share those values" and as "committed to continuing the legacy of Ronald Reagan."<sup>3</sup> Scott Wheeler, the executive director, has a background in investigative reporting and worked at the conservative Cybercast News Service. The co-founder is Peter Leitner, a former Reagan administration official who has also worked as a national security consultant. In the final weekend of the 2008 presidential race, the PAC spent \$2.5 million on ads trying to connect then candidate Obama with Rev. Jeremiah Wright. It also tried to argue that candidate Obama was ineligible for the presidency due to when and where he was born. The live birth certificate from Hawaii did not satisfy them as it did other media outlets. Overall they spent over \$8 million against candidate Obama.<sup>4</sup>

“The live birth certificate from Hawaii did not satisfy them as it did other media outlets.”

Although the PAC is not affiliated with the Republican National Committee, its messages echo GOP leaders. One of the GOP’s intellectual leaders, Newt Gingrich, referred to Park51 as “an assertion of Islamist

<sup>3</sup> <http://nationalrepublicantrust.com/about.html> accessed October 30, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Weigel, D. (2009, March 17). At this writing I know of no other conservative PAC with deeper pockets than the NRTPAC.

triumphalism” that was part of “an Islamist cultural-political offensive designed to undermine and destroy our civilization.”<sup>5</sup>

The actual community center planned for the Park51 site in NYC does not look like a mosque at all. The design evokes traditional Islamic architecture and has the outward appearance of a tall white honeycomb. The address is approximately 2 blocks from the World Trade Center in an old Burlington Coat Factory Building, where local Muslims have already been praying for over a year (Ghosh, 2010). In fact that neighborhood has been the historical center for Muslim immigrants in NYC. In the 1880s this area in lower Manhattan was known as “Little Syria” because of the number of Arab Christians and Muslims who settled the neighborhood. This area also holds the African Burial Ground where enslaved Africans, many of whom were Muslim, are buried (Curtis, 2010).<sup>6</sup>

The 13 story Park51 Center will hold a 500 seat auditorium, theatre, performing arts center, fitness center, basketball court, swimming pool, childcare center, bookstore, culinary school, art studio, food court, a September 11 memorial, and a Muslim prayer space for up to 2,000 people. The prayer space will be located in the basement, in a room technically known as a musalla and not a mosque. Construction constraints disallow the sanctification of a true mosque, so only a musalla, a prayer hall, will be included (Shari, 2010). The Center is also designed to be a place for multi-faith dialogue.

The idea for the Center originated with Imam Feisal Rauf and his wife Daisy Khan, both of whom have earned reputations as moderate Muslims known for their work in promoting interfaith dialogue. The project’s developer is Sharif El-Gamal, who modeled the Center after a Jewish Community Center in Manhattan’s Upper West Side where he is a member (Caruso, 2010).

Given the reality of the purpose, background, and design of the Park51 Community Center, the RNTFAC ad is a work of fiction, designed to incite its

“After Sept. 11, 2001 the Southern Poverty Law Center reported a 17-fold increase in anti-Islamic hate crimes.”

<sup>5</sup> Hertzberg, H. (2010, August 16) Zero Grounds. *The New Yorker*, retrieved from [http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2010/08/16/100816taco\\_talk\\_hertzberg](http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2010/08/16/100816taco_talk_hertzberg)

<sup>6</sup>For more on the history of Islam in the United States see Nyang, S. (1999) *Islam in the United States of America* Chicago: Kazi Publications.

viewers against the Park51 Center. Its content reflects and perpetuates American stereotypes and fears about Islam and Muslims. A 2009 Gallup poll found that Americans felt more prejudice against Islam than against any other faith group. 43% admitted feeling prejudiced toward Muslims (Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, 2010). A 2010 *Time-Abt* SRBI poll found that 47% of Americans thought Islam encouraged violence, although 63% of Americans know no Muslims. In addition, 24% of respondents believed President Obama is Muslim; that number climbs to 47% among Republican respondents (Altman, 2010). In another poll, almost 1 out of 4 Americans said they would not want a Muslim as a neighbor, and fewer than half thought Muslim Americans were loyal to the United States (Esposito, J.L., & Mogahed, D., 2007, p. x). Such views are often expressed in acts of violence against Muslims in America. After Sept. 11, 2001 the Southern Poverty Law Center reported a 17-fold increase in anti-Islamic hate crimes (Tanenbaum Center for Religious Understanding, 2010).

Where does this level of distrust originate, and what are the ideas that foster it? Answering this question requires an analysis of how systems of power like racism and sexism function to both create and reinforce the Islamophobic attitudes evident in the polls and hate crimes referenced above.

“In this country we learn to be on guard against the other.”

### **Learning to Let Down the Guard: Analyzing How Systems of Power Function**

Cornel West (2000, p. 544) writes that “Theory is inescapable because it is an indispensable weapon in struggle, and it is an indispensable weapon in struggle because it provides certain kinds of understanding, certain kinds of illumination, certain kinds of insights that are requisite if we are to act effectively.”<sup>7</sup>

In this country we learn to be on guard against the other. We learn to view unknown others with suspicion and worse. Analyzing the roots and manifestation of American xenophobic tendencies may enable us to learn how to let down our guard and engage others across boundaries of difference. This is exactly the kind

<sup>7</sup> This is an interview between bell hooks and Cornel West.

of interpersonal understanding that dominant systems of power and privilege are designed to prevent.<sup>8</sup> To engage others requires acknowledging their social locations or positions in some way and thus providing for a possible moment of, at least, empathy and, at best, critical solidarity.<sup>9</sup>

Given the role that “far-right Christianity”<sup>10</sup> plays in fomenting suspicion and prejudice against non-Christians, feminist and liberation theologies are critical for effective theory. Without a theological component, theories about how injustice functions are missing something vital. At its best, feminist and critical theory facilitates the interrogation of what Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1992) calls the “politics of location,” the geographical, historical, cultural, psychic and imaginative boundaries that give us political and self-definition. Such interrogation enables an interpretation of contemporary experience that is historically contextualized and analyzed, while also demonstrating how historical practices create existing power relations. It understands that analyzing the interstructuring of various power relations such as racism, classism, religious exclusion, colonialism, heterosexism, ableism, and others, is absolutely critical.

Theoretical analysis is more robust when combined with critical feminist and liberation theological analyses for three reasons.<sup>11</sup> First, religion is often appealed to as the moral underpinning of many positions in public debates when in fact it is being used to reinforce dominant systems of power. Too often,

“Given the role that ‘far-right Christianity’ plays in fomenting suspicion and prejudice against non-Christians, feminist and liberation theologies are critical for effective theory.”

<sup>8</sup>I define dominant systems of power and privilege as those like racism, sexism, class bias, heterosexism, and other injustices that circulate freely in American culture, reinforcing the right to power of white, elite, wealthy men to the varying detriment of all others.

<sup>9</sup>Critical solidarity begins when one sees others as “caught” between and within interlocking webs of power and decides to stand beside them to fight that power system, disavowing oneself (at times) from the privilege that those power systems bestow upon oneself.

<sup>10</sup> I coined the term “far-right Christianity” to denote the cooptation by the conservative right of Christian concepts, images, and/or beliefs to create a view of non-Christian others as fundamentally immoral, deceitful, untrustworthy, and dangerous.

<sup>11</sup> I use “critical” to underscore the ideas of critique, crisis, and assessment, all of which are desperately needed in regard to analysis of poverty policy. Schüssler Fiorenza (1999) explains the term thusly, “A critical approach is interested in weighing, evaluating, and judging texts and their contexts, in exploring crisis situations and seeking their adjudications. Its goals and functions are opposite to those of a more positivist approach of ‘pure’ science.” Schüssler Fiorenza, E. (1999) *Rhetoric and Ethic*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p. 9.

systems of power are both interpreted and defended as “God-ordained” rather than humanly constructed orders.

The RNC PAC ad is a poignant example of this. The ad portrays the Park51 project as a battle between good and evil, where all Muslims are terrorists (most of the footage supposedly portraying Muslims shows men in Arab garb with weapons). These “terrorists” are juxtaposed in striking contrast to “real Americans” who are portrayed as either wrapped in an American flag with the hymn “Amazing Grace” playing in the background or as firefighters on the rubble of the twin towers. The message is clear: Muslims are evil terrorists and Americans are innocent Christian victims of horrific Islamic violence. This message of a war between good and evil and Christianity and Islam is reinforced in the ad by the narrator continually referring to the Community Center as a “mosque” and by showing images of existing mosques instead of the actual modern design of the planned building.

Furthermore, the RPT PAC ad carefully constructs definitions of “moral” and “immoral” in the Park51 debate. Critical feminist and liberation theologies assist us in beginning to disengage these definitions and demonstrate that, too often, nonreligious policy and life cannot be separated from religious understandings and practices, and that what is defined as “religious” or “moral” is often a cover for dominant power interests.

Second, without critical feminist and liberation theologians and ethicists taking a part in public debates, often the loudest or *only* religious voice heard in public debates, or at least the one gleaning the majority of sound bites in national news, has been that of a few conservative Christian groups with enormous power to define what counts as “Christian” for everyone else. Some of the best-known conservative Christian voices made their way into the articles on Park51 written by national news organizations. For example, Franklin Graham (Qtd. In Ghosh, 2010), son of the famous evangelist Billy Graham, was interviewed by *Time* and was quoted saying Islam is “a religion of hatred. It’s a religion of war.” Similarly, in a recent *New Yorker* article Pat Robertson (Qtd. In Wright, 2010) was quoted warning that if the center brings “thousands and thousands” of Muslims into the

The RPT PAC message is clear: “Muslims are evil terrorists and Americans are innocent Christian victims of horrific Islamic violence.”



area, “the next thing you know, they’re going to be taking over the city council. They’re going to have an ordinance that calls for public prayer five times a day.” Missing from most of the national news articles were quotes from more progressive Christian leaders, and although a few articles did report that some religious organizations supported the mosque, the vast majority of their specific examples were of intolerance from Christian leaders.<sup>12</sup> The effect of a public square flooded with conservative Christian voices has been both a general backing away from religion on the part of those who define themselves as nonreligious, and an intimidated silence from many of those who see themselves as Christian but do not want to be identified with the public image of Christianity put out by these groups.

Finally, perhaps the most critical potential contribution of critical feminist and liberation theologies and ethics is in the motivation they bring. Critical feminist liberation theologies provide a sustainable source of moral authority and reflection. Patricia Hill Collins (1998, p. 248) points out that, “Although secular, pragmatic concerns clearly matter, in the absence of deep caring infused with ethical or moral authority, freedom struggles become increasingly difficult to sustain.” Many freedom struggles have been inspired by religious faith from the very beginning, in part because their participants have often found their pursuit of liberty restrained by those who appealed to certain religious ideas and definitions of proper moral action as the basis of their opposition.<sup>13</sup>

“Critical feminist liberation theologies provide a sustainable source of moral authority and reflection.”

Again the RPT PAC ad against Park51 is illustrative. By framing the issue as good vs. evil and American vs. Islamic, and by conflating “American”

<sup>12</sup> For an example of one of the earliest interfaith statements in support of the Park51 project see excerpts from the “To Bigotry, No Sanction” press conference held at the Boston State House September 6, 2010 at <http://www.ants.edu/news/detail/andover-newton-community-members-respond-to-attacks-on-islam/>. However, here too the report on the press conference in that evening’s television news broadcasts gave a minute or so to the Florida pastor threatening to burn Korans to protest Park51 and approximately 10 seconds to the interfaith leaders who spoke at the press conference in support of Park51.

<sup>13</sup> Examples abound, but some particularly pertinent ones include an 1893 text, now reprinted. See Joslyn Gage, M. (1980) *Woman, Church, and State*. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone.; Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *The Woman’s Bible* (reprint, Salem, N.H.: Ayer, 1991), part 1 originally published in 1895, and part 2 in 1898; and Sarah Grimké’s 1838 *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* (reprint, New York: Source Book, 1970).

and “Christian” (remember “Amazing Grace” being played as the ad shows a man wrapped in an American flag), all who support the Center are by definition unchristian and un-American. This also means, of course, that Muslims cannot be Americans. Eboo Patel (Qtd. in Ghosh, 2010) pointed this out when he said recently that “The core argument emerging from [the anti-mosque protests] is that Muslims are not and never can be full Americans.”

As Kathleen Sands (1994, p. 12) writes, liberation movements benefit from faith as a “rich source of social vision, because religions, notwithstanding their presumptive patriarchalism, also mandate some version of justice, compassion, and the more equitable distribution of wealth.” Indeed, many religious people find that our deepest motivation for fighting injustice arises from a belief that God intends for the world to be different than it is, a belief that we are meant to be co-creators with God of a new and just creation. Critical feminist and liberation theologies and ethics foster just practices at every level, where justice is understood as economic, spiritual, emotional, and physical flourishing—in both private and public spheres.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the best-known source for this motivation for justice work is the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan, a story of a man beaten by robbers and left to die. As Jesus is reported to have told the story in Luke 10:29–37, various prominent religious people pass by a wounded man who is a member of an outcast group. Finally, one, moved with compassion, crosses over to where the man lies and helps him. In the same way, feminist theo-ethical engagement requires a moving across the boundary of my own life into that of another, a movement that takes me from the comfortable borders of my own world and puts me face to face with the needs of another. In particular the parable seems to be saying that the greater the chasm between people, the more critical the crossing.

Faith is a “...rich source of social vision, because religions, notwithstanding their presumptive patriarchalism, also mandate some version of justice, compassion, and the more equitable distribution of wealth.”

<sup>14</sup>I agree here with Wayne Meeks’s definition of ethics as “morality rendered self-conscious,” where morality is defined, in Schüssler Fiorenza’s words, as a “pervasive and often only partly conscious set of value-laden dispositions, inclinations, attitudes, and habits.” For this reason, an engaged feminist ethics affects an understanding of myself as a contested site of conflicting power relations, which, if left uninterrogated, will result in my contributing to injustice despite my best intentions. See Meeks, W. (1993) *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries*. New Haven: Yale, p. 4; and Schüssler Fiorenza. (1999) p. 195.

As legal theorist Lucie White (1998, p. 186) notes, moving into the space of another's needs is messy. It takes me from "the clean, quiet space where social measurement, moral deliberation, and legal judgment would seem most comfortably at home. . . ." But how is it that one's theoretical work can reveal the other as the neighbor one is meant to move toward, reveal the path toward that neighbor, and expose those elements that may block our crossing?

An analysis that builds upon both feminist theory and feminist and liberation theologies provides a "road map" for what such movement to the neighbor entails. What becomes clear is that such movement is not simply an emotional response to another, but rather, a radical political act that requires a thorough analysis of dominant systems of power in order to understand what love of neighbor means and requires. For the story of the Good Samaritan focuses on the agency of the subject; in his action, notions of love and justice are brought together.<sup>15</sup> It is this requirement to forge love and justice into one act that comes from the theo-ethical mandate to love one's neighbor as oneself.

By analyzing how power functions, what we're really doing is finding out why it is that certain of our neighbors are so difficult for us to see or so easy for us misunderstand and demonize. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968, p. 167) said, "Without understanding our position in relation to others within the complex of various power structures operating in society, we cannot really know our neighbors. Without such knowledge, we cannot act ethically toward them. Without such knowledge, we cannot love them." Obviously, if we can't recognize our neighbors it will be impossible for us to function as their allies; it will be impossible for us to be ethically accountable to those neighbors.

How do structures of power and domination define the world in such a way that we don't recognize some others as people to whom we are morally accountable? Hill Collins (1998, p. 49) argues that "Domination, whether of race, class, gender, sexuality or nationality, produces public and private knowledges on

"For the story of the Good Samaritan focuses on the agency of the subject; in his action, notions of love and justice are brought together."

<sup>15</sup>I thank Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza for this insight; personal communication, December 1998.

both sides of power relations.” Dominant power systems “guard the borders” of what is understood to be authoritative knowledge, normative truth, and moral action in American society.<sup>16</sup> But what does it mean that we have borders of knowledge to guard? Who gains from this guarding, and whose interests are acted against? The guarding of borders “poses a basic question to our claim to subjectivity—to identity and agency, both as individuals and as political and normative community (White, 1998, p. 184-185).” Such guarding reflects the workings of dominant systems of power to keep some people and groups in the center of definitions of what’s normal and constitutive and others outside those definitions.

We all share this guard duty, whether we’re aware of it or not, in our exercise of power and privilege. James Baldwin reminds us that “You cannot escape the pathology of a country in which you’re born. You can resist it, you can react to it, you can do all kinds of things, but you’re trapped in it (Qtd. in Hill Collins, 2006, p. 95).” So we must learn first how to identify and then put down the pathology-based weapons we use for guard duty in the U.S. context (a process requiring theoretical analysis), then learn how to map the terrain that separates us from others, and finally how to cross the border to the other. Such a crossing requires both a critique of status quo understandings and a reconstruction of different systems of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Theories can function as weapons because they are not simply descriptive but often function in prescriptive ways as well. They are explanations of the world that carry a certain authority. Thus theory plays an authorizing function in that it gives authority to a particular way of viewing and defining the world.<sup>18</sup> Theory that isn’t done well will be co-opted by dominant

“We all share this guard duty, whether we’re aware of it or not, in our exercise of power and privilege.”

<sup>16</sup>I am borrowing this phrase from Lucie White, “On the Guarding of Borders,” pp. 184-185.

<sup>17</sup>Collins argues that there are four responses to one’s being excluded and defined by policy: believe prevailing wisdom, act in accordance with it (i.e., accept it), critique it, or construct different knowledge. Effective theory enables us to do the third and fourth responses. See 1998, pp. 106–7.

<sup>18</sup> See the description of this authorization process in Maria Lugones, “On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism,” in Claudia Card, ed. *Feminist Ethics*, 1991.

systems of power to reinforce normative ways of seeing the world. Theory that is not done carefully is homogenizing in its impact: it will serve to reinforce normative experience while simultaneously rendering non-normative experience invisible, enabling stereotypes about that non-normative experience to more easily escape interrogation and critique.

### Systemic Powers and the Construction of Knowledge

Knowing how power functions in society and being able to recognize its tactics are both fundamental elements of an engaged feminist Theo-ethics and are key to building just personal action and practice. Without the ability to diagnose structural causes of injustice, we will never be able to recognize the proper solutions, let alone implement them. Key to understanding how race bias, gender bias, heterosexism, far-right Christianity, class bias and other biases work together to reinforce power and privilege for a few at the top of the social hierarchy is understanding the role bias plays in the construction of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Systems of bias legitimize and define particular public knowledges as “normative,” “natural,” or “commonsense.” Neighbors that don’t meet these definitions, in this case Muslim neighbors, tend to disappear from public view and understanding. Patricia Hill Collins (1998, p. 44-45) explains public knowledges this way: “Designed to represent the interests of those privileged by hierarchical power relations of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, and nationality, elite discourses present a view of social reality that elevates the ideas and actions of highly educated white men as normative and superior.” Those whose power and privilege puts them at the top of society have the power to determine what counts as truth for everyone else, the power to define how the world is and should be. As Margaret Urban Walker argues, “Reproducing uncritically one’s specific position as the norm is an *exercise* of one’s privilege that at the same time *reinforces* it

“Dominant power systems ‘guard the borders’ of what is understood to be authoritative knowledge, normative truth, and moral action in American society.”

<sup>19</sup>It is important to differentiate between systems of power and systems of bias. The two are always connected; racism is both. But a bias may be discussed on its own, apart from other biases, whereas a system of power is always benefiting from and reinforcing other dominant power systems (sexism, classism, and so forth) for the benefit of an elite group of people. Thus, a power system is the result of an interplay of biases on which it feeds and grows. As systems, dominant powers produce normative knowledge.

(Urban Walker, p. 54).” It is critical that theories about how the world is and should be are analyzed contextually, that is, that they be understood as arising from a particular social location affected by race, class, gender, nationality and so forth, *and* as possibly reflecting the view from that location but not necessarily useful for explaining any other location.<sup>20</sup> They may explain the world of privileged white males, but they misrepresent the experiences of Muslim Americans.

It is also critical to ask how dominant systems of power gain and retain their authority, their claims to “rightness,” and in effect their moral authority for defining how the world “should” be structured. Dominant systems of power retain normative power because they have strength and credibility; they reflect and reinforce “commonsense” understandings of people and of life. They do this in a variety of ways, always simultaneously reflecting and reinforcing cultural and political hierarchies. But *what counts as credible knowledge reflects the view from the top*.

That top tier defines reality, or at least what is seen as normative, for everyone else. Those operating from top positions of privilege and power create “epistemic authority,” a way of knowing or defining the world that determines what counts as knowledge for everyone else.<sup>21</sup> The RPT PAC ad makes such authoritative claims. First, the narrator, who sounds educated, white, and male, will be understood as credible, because he evokes images of powerful and privileged members of society. His voice embodies epistemic authority, which is always raced and gendered, by sounding white and male. Second, the ad gives all Muslims the identity of Arab (despite the fact that only 20% of the world’s Muslims are actually Arab (Esposito, et.al., p. 28)) and evil, demonizing all

“Those operating from top positions of privilege and power create ‘epistemic authority.’”

<sup>20</sup>Many feminist theorists have suggested this approach. See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: South End, 2000), and *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End, 1981); Collins, *Fighting Words*, especially xiv; Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1988); and the various works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, among others.

<sup>21</sup> Walker (2007) coined this term.

Muslims as terrorists. A necessary social identity like this is an identity generally mapped onto a certain kind of body, making it a condition of birth and therefore both “natural” and inevitable. In the case of the NRT PAC ad, the necessary identity is “Muslim terrorist” and the ad maps it onto all Arab-looking bodies. Necessary identities are usually applied to those with less power and privilege in order to shore up power and privilege for those with more power. Such identities are “epistemic and social accomplishments... and are not necessary for the ones who bear them, but for others who need to legitimate the ways they treat the bearers or to foreclose examination of those ways (Walker, p. 165).”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, a necessary social identity functions to make unjust actions toward those so portrayed appear “normal” and reasonable” and just (Walker, p. 162). By literally demoralizing Muslims as dangerous terrorists, the RPT PAC ad makes it seem not just reasonable but patriotic and moral to oppose the plans of the American Muslims in New York City for the Park51 Center.

One way the functioning of necessary identities is protected from exposure is through normalizing the coercion and violence that are required to keep them in place. By defining all Muslims as un-American, terrorist, and against the United States, patriotism and pro-American are understood as anti-terror, anti-Muslim, and thus anti Park51. From this point of view, the message in the ad makes sense; it seems reasonable, and anyone who opposes such understanding by definition is anti-American. By fostering this “commonsense” understanding of the issues surrounding Park51, the ad masks its racism and anti-Islamic rhetoric. Dressed up in patriotic garb, the racism in the ad appears to be patriotic, American, moral and Christian—the way any right-thinking American would see the issue.

Since generally it is from a position of power that social norms and values are generated, Muslim voices in the media do not have a chance of being seen with the same credibility as do the “real American” voices. The further people are from positions of power, the less they resemble that norm, the harder it will be for

---

<sup>22</sup> Walker (2007, p. 162) describes the development and functioning of necessary identities.

their voices to be heard, and the less likely it will be that those with privilege and power will have any idea of what their daily experience consists of or feel compelled to understand it.

The necessary social identities fostered by the RPT PAC ad are reinforced through stereotypes. Those stereotypes denigrate Muslim character and morality and reinforce this moral misunderstanding of what Muslims are like. People believe the stereotypes because “stereotypes organize fields of interpersonal experience rather than being discovered within them, rendering especially salient those instances that fit, while screening out or cordoning off ones that don’t.”<sup>23</sup> If the ad’s images reinforce what racism and far-right Christianity have already led non-Muslims to believe about non-white and non-Christian people, then the ad’s images seem that much more credible. And since most Americans have never met a Muslim, they have no other “data” to confuse the truth they’ve already embraced about who Muslims are and what they are like. This is how moral epistemology, the nature, source, and justification of moral knowledge, is created and sustained. Systems of power like racism, sexism, and religious bias work together to create a commonsense understanding of which members of American society are most moral and credible--always those who are white, male, privileged, and powerful. This is how prejudice is created and sustained.

“The further people are from positions of power, the less they resemble that norm, the harder it will be for their voices to be heard.”

Prejudice, in turn, shapes personal practices and public policy, perhaps more so than anything else. Again, the Park51 case is a poignant example. As noted above, while most Americans don’t know a Muslim, a *New York Times* poll showed that Americans opposed the Center by a 54-20% margin (Barbarao, M., 2010). Other polls showed similarly strong opposition.<sup>24</sup> The more legitimate the negative myths and stereotypes about Muslims seem to be, the stronger public opposition to the Park51 Center is likely to be.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Walker (2007, p. 202), paraphrasing Lorraine Code.

<sup>24</sup> For an account of the results of other similarly negative polls see the extensive “Park51” article on Wikipedia at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Park51>, accessed 10/29/10.

<sup>25</sup> In 1996, when welfare in the US was dismantled, Martin Gilens did a study that found that racist myths about welfare influenced a person’s opposition to welfare in direct proportion to the degree



Such beliefs adopt the view from the top of the societal power system and mask the effects of structural injustice; they mask the operation of dominant systems of power. As Walker (2007, p. 65) warns, “social powers can render some people’s assumptions arbitrarily prevalent or undeservedly authoritative in inquiry or elsewhere.” The more privileged and powerful one is, the more authority your views will hold. The further up you are, the more your intuitions or assumptions become the “data” behind the construction of moral theories (Walker, 2007, pp. 62-63).

This data, these perceptions of how the world is, are learned within community. Individual people within the community may not agree with these perceptions, but they will be familiar with them. “Any particular system of mutual moral accounting is a cultural practice already there that we learn from others (Walker, 2007, p. 69).” We learn prejudice and bias within and from our communities.

It is very difficult to move across the differences that divide communities. Legal theorist Martha Minow (1990, p. 3) points out that one downfall of analysis is that “when we analyze, we simplify.” We break things down into familiar categories to see them more clearly (or so we believe). But the way we see things and label things has a lot to do with how we respond to those things and with the moral and ethical judgments we make about them. For example, Minow (1990, pp. 4-5) describes the work of Harold Herzog, Jr., an animal behaviorist who has looked at how the labels we use impact our moral responses to mice. At the University of Tennessee there is a facility for animals that houses 15,000 mice used in experiments each year on the campus. The university requires that any experiment using mice be approved by both the Federal Department of

“Language and labels like Arab=Muslim=terrorist and their associated moral valuations are produced by systems of power, and they play a key role in perpetrating and perpetuating injustice.”

---

to which the person believed those myths. The more legitimate the myths seemed, the more normal or commonsense the myths seemed, the greater the person’s opposition to welfare. Writing about the study, Traci West explains that one of Gilens’ most significant findings was that “white perceptions of blacks as lazy have a larger effect on their welfare policy preferences than does economic self-interest, beliefs about individualism, or views about the poor in general. The judgment of whites about how to construct national policy is fundamentally distorted by their racist views.” See West, T. (1999, p. 141) *Agenda for the Churches: Uprooting a National Policy of Morally Stigmatizing Poor Single Black Moms. Welfare Policy: Feminist Critiques*, ed. Bounds, E.M., Brubaker, P.K., & Mary E. Hobgood, M. E. (Eds.), Cleveland: Pilgrim.

Agriculture and the American Association for the Accreditation of Lab Animal Care.

But only experimental mice receive this level of care and concern. If a mouse escapes, it loses its label of “lab mouse” and attains the label “pest,” and then it is routinely captured and killed. No body oversees the methods used for this destruction, and no permission needs to be gained. Herzog (Qtd. In Minow, 1990, p. 4-5) says that “Once a lab animal hits the floor and becomes an escapee, its moral standing is instantly diminished.”

The role and label of the mouse determine how the very same animal may be perceived and treated differently. As Minow (1990, p. 5) points out, interactions between moral judgments and labels can be even more pronounced with people. This is especially true for those with less influence in society, for whom efforts to rename themselves may be undermined by the attitudes and the power/authority of those who have defined the differences. It may be very difficult for them to fight the labels assigned to them. This is one reason why it is so important for disenfranchised groups to name themselves.

Language and labels like Arab=Muslim=terrorist and their associated moral valuations are produced by systems of power, and they play a key role in perpetrating and perpetuating injustice. Minow (1990, p. 7) writes, “[P]utting labels . . . on people is an effective way to deny the bonds of commonality we have together. There is a possibility that our labels, our terms of comparison, may shut off any understanding of the connections we have with another person as a human being, in that we risk becoming less than human ourselves.”

Dominant powers function this way purposefully. As long as I can’t understand or connect with those who fall below me in the power and privilege hierarchy—or don’t have to—I won’t question the contours of my own life. I won’t see how I may benefit from my race, religion, and class. I’ll buy the lie that I am simply “better”—more skilled, a harder worker, more moral—than those below me, who haven’t achieved as much as I have. I will not see the role that systems of power like race, gender, religion, and class play in devaluing people—literally *demoralizing* them—nor understand how such devaluation keeps them in

“The privileged person doesn’t see his or her own experience as one among many but as normative.”

particular positions of powerlessness. As long as we believe that those who have the most privilege have come by their power legitimately, rather than by the coercion or misrepresentation of those below, we won't question their right to be there. As long as I understand an elite white protestant man as better than I am, as having insight I don't possess, I will see him as "better," not privileged; as "deserving," not benefiting from a system of power that always defines all wealthy white protestant males as knowledgeable about the world and therefore as deserving of power and privilege.

Walker (2007, pp. 21-22, 63) calls this view from the top of the social hierarchy the *canonical form of moral theory*. It takes the viewpoints and prerogatives of those with the most power and status and acts as if they're God's view, not the view of the group with the most power and privilege. It assumes the power to model for all what may be "obvious, acceptable, or comprehensible only to some of us (2007, p. 56)." Walker (2007, p. 54) warns that when such representations of moral life are posed as "...truths' about 'human' interest, 'our' intuitions, 'rational' behavior..." they're not just false, "they uncritically reproduce the represented positions and locations as *normative*, i.e., as the central or standard (if not the only) case."

When this happens the particular nature of those at the top's own experience disappears and all others' experiences become problematic—substandard or even immoral. The privileged person doesn't see his or her own experience as one among many but as normative, as that against which everything else should be measured.

Multiply constructed epistemic authority has the ability to compromise how all of us see ourselves. Those of us with the most privilege and power in American society need new insight into ourselves if we are to gain moral understanding of others. Walker (2007, p. 79) warns, "When members of groups historically or systematically disqualified from epistemic or moral authority begin to occupy positions that carry it....new judgments and new means of judging are likely to result." Such changes depend on changes in power, material goods, and

"Those of us with the most privilege and power in American society need new insight into ourselves if we are to gain moral understanding of others."

access to institutions and places that “shape public discourses and disseminate them (Walker, 2007, p. 71).”

But until and unless this happens the view from the top of the social hierarchy will be defended as “God’s revealed will” in a seemingly naturalized or commonsense process. Religious texts and interpretations may be used by elites to further rationalize and reinforce their “right” to power and privilege. When ideology is dressed up as God, or far-right Christianity, it becomes particularly cunning and evil, and much more difficult to expose and fight. Such ideology masks structural sins such as racism and sexism while serving as their essential servant. Ideologies create lies about the world at the behest of the politically, socially, and religiously elite. These moral valuations, and the power and privilege behind them, create commonsense understandings of the world.

To overcome such epistemic authority is very difficult. Muslim families have to be far above the norm in all valued social indicators to be thought of as even half as successful and moral as an average Christian family. The reverse is true also: Christian families will be given the benefit of the doubt in a way that Muslim families will not.

The systems of power like racism, far-right Christianity, and sexism, so evident in the epistemic narrative created by the NRT PAC ad, will not die easily. But they can be fought by exposing the way their lies, myths, untruths and general perpetration of moral misunderstanding of Muslims have been fostered. As Jennifer Peace (2010) wrote recently, “Suggesting that no building associated with Islam should be built in proximity to Ground Zero is to suggest that all Muslims are irrevocably tainted by the acts of terrorists claiming (erroneously) to be acting in the name of this religion. Are we willing to suggest by analogy that all Christians are similarly tainted because of the actions of the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda?” Certainly we can do better than this.

In *Where do we go from here?* Dr. King (1968, p. 167) wrote, “This is the great new problem of humankind. We have inherited a large house, a great world house in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu—a

“The systems of power like racism, far-right Christianity, and sexism, so evident in the epistemic narrative created by the NRT PAC ad, will not die easily.”

family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.” This is even truer now than it was in Dr. King’s day. Prejudice stands at the door of this house, torch in hand, ready to burn it down. May we have the courage to fight it, and the theoretical tools to make that possible.

## References

- Altman, A. (2010, August 19) Majority Oppose Mosque, Many Distrust Muslims. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,2011799,00.html#>
- Barbaro, M. (2010, July 30) Debate Heats up about Mosque Near Ground Zero. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/31/nyregion/31mosque.html>
- Caruso, D.B. (2010, October 2) On paper, NY Islamic center looks modern, secular. *The Washington Post*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/02/AR2010100201683.html>
- Curtis, E.E. (2010, July 23) Islam has long history downtown: Why the ‘Ground Zero Mosque’ Belongs in lower Manhattan. *New York Daily News.com*. Retrieved from [www.dailynews.com/fdcp?1288287059076](http://www.dailynews.com/fdcp?1288287059076)
- Esposito, J.L., & Mogahed, D. (2007) *Who Speaks for Islam?* New York: Gallup Press.
- Gallup Center for Muslim Studies. (2010, January 21) In US Religious Prejudice Stronger Against Muslims. *Gallup* Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/125312/religious-prejudice-stronger-against-muslims.aspx>
- Ghosh, B. (2010, August 19) Does America have a Muslim Problem? *Time*. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2011798,00.html>.
- Hertzberg, H. (2010, August 16) Zero Grounds. *The New Yorker*, Retrieved from [http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2010/08/16/100816taco\\_talk\\_hertzberg](http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2010/08/16/100816taco_talk_hertzberg)
- Hill Collins, P. (1998) *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Hill Collins, P. (2006) *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*. Pennsylvania: Temple University Press.
- King, M.L. Jr. (1968) *Where do we go from here?* Beacon Press: Boston.
- Minow, M. (1990) *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion, and American Law*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Peace, J. (2010) An Interfaith Educator Responds to the Mosque Controversy. *Andover Newton Theological School web site*. Retrieved from <http://www.ants.edu/peacemosquestatement>
- Sands, K.M. (1994) *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Thought*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Shari. (2010) Islamic Park51 Design Revealed to Public. *Gowanus Lounge*. Retrieved from <http://www.gowanuslounge.com/islamic-park-design-revealed-public/>
- Talpade Mohanty, C. (1992) Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience. In Michèle M. Barrett, M. & A. Phillips, Eds. (1992) *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*.
- Tanenbaum Center for Religious Understanding. (2010) Muslims in America & Islam Fact Sheet. Retrieved from [www.tanenbaum.org](http://www.tanenbaum.org).
- Schüssler Fiorenza, E. (1999) *Rhetoric and Ethic*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Weigel, D. (2009, March 17) Hard Right PAC Complicates GOP Mission. *The Washington Independent*. Retrieved from <http://washingtonindependent.com/34087/hard-right-pac-complicates-gop-mission>.
- West, C. (2000) *The Cornel West Reader*. Basic Books: New York.
- White, L. (1998) On the Guarding of Borders. *Harvard Civil Rights–Civil Liberties Law Review*. 33: 186.
- Wright, L. (2010, September 20) Intolerance: Comment. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from [http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2010/09/20/100920taco\\_talk\\_wright?printable=true](http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2010/09/20/100920taco_talk_wright?printable=true)